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The Case of Offences against Christia-
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S E R M O N

Preached in the High Church of E-
dinburgh, Monday, January 4. 1742.

Upon Occasion of the Anniversary Meet-
ing of the Society in *Scotland* for propa-
gating CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.

And published at their Request.

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One of the Ministers of EDINBURGH.



EDINBURGH:

Printed by T. W. and T. RUDDIMAN'S for G. HAM-
MON and J. BALFOUR, and sold at their Shop opposite to
the Parliament-Close. 1742.

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IN publishing the following Sermon, the Author hath taken the Liberty to supply from his Manuscript several things, which, to save Time, he was obliged to pass over in the Delivery.



*The Case of Offences against Christian-
nity considered.*

A S E R M O N, &c.

MATTH. xviii. 7.

Wo unto the World because of Offences.

THE Occasion of our present Meeting may naturally lead us to reflect on the Opposition made to Christianity in the World. In maintaining and promoting its Interests, we have not only to communicate the Knowledge of it to those who live in Ignorance, but to overcome the Force of Prejudice opposed to it, and to defend it against all the Arts of false Reasoning. But there is one thing, my Brethren, which should give us the most sensible Concern, that professed Christians should at any time by their Beha-

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viour have contributed to increase the Opposition, to raise Prejudice against their Religion, and to furnish its Adversaries with any sort of Argument against it. This falls properly under the Notion of *Offences* spoke of in my Text; Stumbling-blocks cast in the way of others, Occasions given to them to become prejudiced against the Truth, and to reject it. Our blessed Saviour foretells with Regret the Disadvantage the World would sustain by this means, being led aside from the way of Truth and Righteousness: *Wo unto the World because of Offences.* These Offences have arisen from the bad Lives of many Christians. I hope *better things* of my Hearers, *and things which accompany Salvation*; tho' it may be needful to offer some things on this Subject for our greater Caution, and particularly for supporting Christianity, amidst those Wounds it has received in *the House* of its pretended *Friends*.

How many of the Christian Name have been, and still are, guilty of living in the indulged Practice of Sin and Wickedness; Intemperance, Injustice, Fraud and Oppression, are not uncommonly practised under the Profession of Christianity: Some of the grossest Crimes have been committed by Persons brought up in the Christian Religion. And as to many who keep up a tolerable Chara

ter, may it not be justly said, *What do ye more than others?** So few are there, comparatively speaking, who remarkably shine in all Virtue and Goodness! But this is not all; Christianity has been most perversely improved to bad Purposes; it hath been made an Engine of worldly Policy, a Tool to serve the Interests of selfish and ambitious Men: It hath been made an occasion of raising a Tyranny of the worst Kind, Tyranny over the Understandings and Consciences of Men; by which means they have been more effectually enslaved in their outward Concerns. To promote these worldly Views, what Frauds and Villanies have often been committed, under the pious pretence of serving the Interests of Christ and his Church! It hath been abused into an Occasion of fatal Divisions, of bitterest Strife and Contention, of deadly Hatred on account of religious Differences; of the most violent Persecutions, the greatest Cruelties and Barbarities, committed both by one Party of Christians against another, and by Christians against those who unhappily wandered in the Paths of Heathenish Delusion.

Now, as we are told that the Wickedness of the Priests, *Eli's* Sons, their vile Prostitution of their Office, made *Men* to *abhor the Offering of the Lord*†; and as it is

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* *Matth.* v. 47. † *2 Sam.* ii. 17.

foretold by the Apostle *Peter* concerning false Teachers who should arise in the Christian Church, that *by reason of them the Way of Truth should be evil spoken of*†; such has actually been the Fate of Christianity. Whereas the Excellency of it appearing in the exemplary Lives of Christians, might readily recommend it to Mens Consciences, and thus overcome the Prejudice arising from their vicious Passions; the Wickedness of professed Christians obscures the Glory of their Religion, and lessens its Influence in commanding the Esteem of Mankind. This has even an immediate Tendency to raise disgust: The Wickedness committed under the Christian Name; the Mischiefs it has been made the occasion of, as an Handle for enslaving, plundering and destroying Mankind; these things being, by an hasty and unjust Application, imputed to Christianity itself, have set it in a disagreeable Light, and created an aversion at it, as in this way supposed an Enemy to the Peace and Happiness of Mankind. These things creating an immediate Prejudice and Aversion, have further been improved in the way of Argument against the Divine Original of Christianity. The Opposers of it have not indeed failed to represent the Corruptions of the Christian World, and the mischievous

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† 2 *Pet.* ii. 2.

Purposes to which Christianity has been perverted, in the strongest Terms; and imputing these to Christianity itself, have alleged, that instead of promoting the Interest of Virtue, it has made Men more fierce and unfociable, more mischievous than before, and so hath done more Hurt than Good; That *the World does not appear much mended since the times of Tiberius*; That *the Bigotry which hath had such terrible Effects among Christians, was little felt or known in the Pagan World*; That *the Zeal of Christians has produced more fatal Effects than any other religious Belief, yea, than any other Cause whatsoever*; and that *the Face of things has been visibly altered to the worse, in all these Countries where this Religion obtained, from the time that it prevailed in them*: From which it is concluded, that such an Institution cannot be from God; That *a Religion could never be designed by God to produce great and extraordinary Benefits to Mankind, which, as is said, never did produce such Effects, but the quite contrary*. Several things to this purpose have been insisted on, particularly by late Writers*.

My Business shall be to vindicate Christianity

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* Christianity as old as the Creation, p. 366 and 84, 2d Edit, 8vo. Letter to the Minister of Moffat, p. 6, 7, 8.

nity against the Force of this arguing, as an excellent and useful Institution, and therefore worthy of God. And in managing this Point, I hope not to contribute to the Offence I would remove, as if Christianity rendred Men ill-natured and severe; but to express myself with that Temper, which becomes one pleading the Cause of the great *Prince of Peace* and Pattern of Meekness, the Cause of that Religion, which enjoins *the Servant of the Lord to be gentle unto all Men, and in Meekness to instruct those who oppose themselves* †.

The Argument against Christianity which I am now to consider, proceeds upon these two Things; that either it hath had no Influence at all in reforming Mankind, and making them good and virtuous, more than they would otherwise have been: Or if it has, that, by the bad Purposes to which it has been improved, it has done more Hurt than Good: From which it is supposed to follow, that it can't be from God, or that the Arguments for its Divinity, from the supposed Usefulness and Excellency of it, fall to the Ground.

First, From the wicked Lives of many Christians, and the small Advancement others seem to make in Virtue, it may be alledged, that Christianity hath had no Influence

† 2 Tim. ii. 24, 25.

ence at all in reforming Mankind, and making them good and virtuous, more than they would otherwise have been. Now, in opposition to this View of the Argument, to vindicate the Usefulness and Excellency of our Religion, let us consider the following things which I shall lay before you.

1. It appears, by looking into Christianity itself, that it hath the strongest Tendency to promote Virtue, and is the best calculated for this Purpose that can possibly be imagined. This it proposes as its express Design. *Jesus Christ came to call Sinners to Repentance; to save us from our Sins**; *to bless us, in turning away every one of us from his Iniquities†*; *He gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all Iniquity‡*, might deliver us from the Slavery of Sin, and purify unto himself a peculiar People zealous of good Works; *the Grace of God that bringeth Salvation teacheth us, that denying Ungodliness and worldly Lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this World***. This is the Sum of all the Precepts of Christianity; this is what all its Doctrines point at, and enforce in the strongest Manner. All the Advantage of Religion in general, or the Acknowledgment of a supreme Being, for influ,

* *Matth.* ix. 13. and i. 21. † *Acts* iii. 26. ‡ *Tit.* ii. 14. ** *Tit.* ii. 11, 12.

influencing Virtue; enjoining the Practice of it, as the Law of the great Governour of the World, who will reward our Obedience and punish our Disobedience; recommending it by the Obligations of Gratitude, as agreeable to him to whom we owe our Being, and all the Blessings we enjoy and are capable of; setting before us in the Deity the most glorious Pattern of Goodness, to inspire us with the Love of it: This Method, I say, of forming us to Virtue by a Regard to a Deity, the Christian Religion greatly improves, and enlarges with peculiar Discoveries. Here we have the Duties of Virtue enjoined us in an express Revelation from God, declaring his Will to Men, and confirmed by the most extraordinary Instances of divine Power accompanying it: We have this Declaration of his Will conveyed to us by the most glorious Messenger, the only begotten Son of God, who himself is clothed with the Authority of universal Lord, and possessed of *all Power in Heaven and Earth**. While we have this Discovery of the divine Will presented to us, by which it must appear that *we all have sinned*†, and so are become obnoxious to Punishment, without some gracious Condescension of the supreme Lawgiver; the Gospel here interposes with a most necessary Discovery, the Assurance

* *Matth. xxviii. 18.* † *Rom. iii. 23;*

rance of Pardon upon our Repentance, and
 of the Acceptance of our sincere Obedience
 for the future, in Jesus Christ, *whom God*
hath set forth, dying and suffering for our
 Sins, *to be a Propitiation through Faith*
*in his Blood**. In the amazing Sufferings
 which the Son of God became subject to as
 a Sacrifice for our Sins, we have the most
 affecting Representation of the Evil of Sin,
 to render it hateful to us, and of the vast
 Importance of Goodness, which Almighty
 God is at so great Expence to recover in the
 World. By this Method there is at the same
 time the strongest Check given to Sin, as
 the irreconcilable Object of God's Hatred,
 and the greatest Encouragement given to Re-
 pentance and sincere Obedience, which we
 are assured will be *accepted in the beloved*.
 While Christianity sets before us God's Love
 of Virtue and Hatred of Vice, it likewise
 clearly reveals to us the Testimonies of these,
 which we are to expect, the everlasting Re-
 wards and Punishments to be dispensed by
 him in another World, which the Light of
 Nature and Reason gives but probable Inti-
 mations of: It discovers to us not only a fu-
 ture State of the Souls Existence in Happi-
 ness or Misery, according to our good or
 bad Conduct, but a Resurrection of the Bo-
 dy, a general Appearance of all Mankind
 before

* Rom. iii. 25.

before Jesus Christ, as the visible Judge of the World, surrounded with glorious Majesty; a solemn Separation then made between the righteous and the wicked; the wicked condemned *to everlasting Punishment*, and *the righteous* received *into Life eternal* *. As we have here proposed to us an inconceivably great and eternal Reward, to animate us in a Course of well-doing; so the Views we have given us of its Nature are such, as serve immediately to cherish and improve in us the Love of Virtue itself, and a Taste for the inward Pleasures of it, and to wean our Hearts from sensual and worldly Delights: It being represented as an Happiness consisting chiefly in spiritual Entertainments, in the Exercises and Enjoyments of perfect Virtue; a State *wherein dwelleth Righteousness* †; where, *seeing God as he is, we shall be like him* ‡; where *Charity* ** or Love shall reign triumphant above all the present means of its Improvement. By all these Discoveries Christianity greatly heightens the Obligations of Gratitude to God, which should influence us to a virtuous Practice: To the Blessings of Creation and Providence it adds the superior Obligations of redeeming Love; *God so loving the World that he gave his only begotten Son,*

* *Matth.* xxv. 31—46. † *2 Pet.* iii. 13. ‡ *1 John* iii.
2. ** *1 Cor.* xiii. 8—13.

Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting Life *; God commending his Love towards us, in that while we were yet Sinners Christ died for us †. In this the Gospel gives us the most amiable View of God, to possess our Souls with the highest Esteem of him, and make us obey him with Pleasure; *God is Love* ‡: It sets before us the most glorious Example of Goodness in the Deity; Goodness exerted in the most remarkable Discovery of it toward People of all Ranks, Ages and Nations; teaching us by this special View of the divine Love and Mercy, to *be merciful as our Father in Heaven is merciful* **; that as *God so loved us, we ought also to love one another* ††. And to give us the greatest Advantage in the way of Imitation, for being trained up to Virtue, it hath given us in Jesus Christ the most perfect Example of it in our own Nature, and accommodated to the Circumstances of Humanity. To crown all, Christianity gives us the most necessary and encouraging Promise of a divine Assistance in the Performance of our Duty, and in encountering the Temptations we meet with, to turn us aside from it. Here then is every thing which can be imagined most effectual

* John iii. 16. † Rom. v. 8. ‡ 1 John iv. 8, 16.
 Luke vi. 36. †† 1 John iv. 11.

etual for reclaiming us from Sin, and forming us to Virtue; for exciting our Endeavours in a virtuous Practice; for possessing our Souls with the inward Dispositions of Goodness; with Love to God and Esteem of him; with all kind and benevolent Affections, kindled by the View of that divine Character of Love which we are taught to adore; with the Love of Goodness as the Glory and Happiness of our reasonable Natures, the Perfection of which will adorn and bless the heavenly Regions. But,

2. Christianity, as an Institution designed for the Reformation of Mankind, and their Improvement in Goodness, is in this respect all consistent with itself; there is nothing in it which can be supposed to defeat what I have represented of its good Tendency. A late Writer* imagines he has found out something in the Christian Religion itself, which should not only destroy its good Influence, but produce the most pernicious Effects; *the great Stress which it lays, as he alledges, on mere Belief and Orthodoxy.* This is indeed the most groundless Charge against Christianity that can well be imagined. Had it been said, that many Christians, in all the different Parties of them, have laid too much Stress on mere Belief and Orthodoxy, the Charge indeed had been too true: But I must

* Letter to the Minister of *Moffat*, Page 74

must observe, that it is not quite fair, not altogether agreeable to that Freedom of Thought and Enquiry which our Adversaries so much boast of, to take their Accounts of Christianity at second hand, even from its professed Followers, who possibly may be either weak or perverse enough to misrepresent it, when they themselves may have Recourse to the original Records of it. In these it most evidently appears, that Christianity is far from laying *great Stress*, or indeed *any Stress at all on mere Belief and Orthodoxy*: The *Faith* it insists for is such as *works by Love*†; and *Faith without Works* is expressly declared to be unprofitable to Salvation: This the Apostle *James* insists upon at some length, *Ch. ii. from v. 14.* Nay the promoting of Purity and Goodness, of Love to God and Man, as the immediate Principle of all virtuous Practice, is represented as the great End of Christianity, to which all the Parts of it are subservient, and for the sake of which they have place in the Christian Scheme: Insomuch that this is given as the Standard by which to determine what things do or do not belong to Christianity; their having a Tendency, or not, to advance this great Design of it. This we may see *1 Tim. i. 3, &c.* where the Apostle recommends to *Timothy* to charge some

† *Gal. v. 6,*

some that they teach no other Doctrine, neither give heed to Fables and endless Genealogies, which minister Questions rather than godly edifying, which is in Faith. And what is that Doctrine, than which no other was to be taught, nothing but what was agreeable, and had a Relation to it? What way shall we distinguish the godly edifying which is in Faith, from useless Questions which were to be set aside? This must appear by regarding the End of Christianity, to which every thing else in it is to be referred; and this he represents in the following Verse: Now the End of the Commandment is Charity, or Love, Love to God and a Conformity to the divine Character, which is Love; out of a pure Heart, and of a good Conscience, and of Faith unfeigned. This is the Design for which the Christian Faith is to be improved; the godly edifying which is in Faith, is by means of Faith edifying the Body of Christ in Love †; the true Christian Doctrine is such as has a Tendency to this as the proper Influence of it. This the Apostle would have Christians closely attend to as the invariable Rule of their Conduct; from which, says he, some having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling. To the same Purpose is another Passage in this Epistle, Chap. vi.

† Eph. iv. 16.

3, &c. If any Man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesom Words, even the Words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Doctrine which is according to Godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about Questions, and Strifes of Words, &c. Where the wholesom Words of our Lord Jesus Christ are distinguished by this Character, the Doctrine which is according to Godliness; and by the Apostle's Determination, such who consent not to this, who depart from this View of the Christian Doctrine, dote about Questions and Strifes of Words. So abundantly does Christianity vindicate itself from the Charge of leading People's Minds off from real Goodness, by laying Stress on mere Belief. Thus it is all of a piece, in every Respect calculated for reclaiming Men from Sin, and advancing the Interest of Virtue. If therefore it hath in fact had but small Success, we reasonably ought to consider what may have been the Occasions of this, that we may see if possibly these may be removed, to make way for the happy Influence of Christianity. But,

3. Let us consider what is to be said as to the Fact alledged in the Objection, That Christianity has done no good. This is pretended to be supported by appealing to History, and comparing the State of the

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Christian World in general as to its Morals, with what other Countries are, or have been†.

As to this I must observe, that general Comparisons of this kind cannot always be brought to a certain Determination: And if not, they can be of no weight in an Argument, against the evident good Tendency of Christianity; a thing plainly demonstrable, or even immediately obvious upon an impartial View of it. If it shall be said, that to insist for Demonstration in these Cases, of general Facts relating to the good or bad State of the World in point of Morals, the Advancement or Decline of Virtue in it, or in the several Nations of it; to require further Proof of these than the general Notions one is led to form from History, is to insist for a thing impossible:—I believe it is so: And the just Conclusion is, that to argue in this way concerning any Institution, without considering the Nature and Tendency of that Institution in itself, will, at least for most part, be a very precarious way of reasoning, which can give no just Satisfaction. The general Notions of the State of the World as to its Morals, in the different Ages of it, formed upon reading the History of these Ages, will often be very different in different Persons, according to their several Complexions, and

† See the Passages above referred to of the forecited Authors.

as they affect. In comparing different Nations and Ages, as to their general Character for Virtue, there may be manifest Difficulties in the way of determining with Certainty. It may be sometimes not easy to determine in such a Comparison between particular Persons; because we do not know the natural Strength of Passion, or particular Circumstances of Temptation, which one or other of them has to struggle with, by which the Strength and Degree of their Virtue is to be measured. It is no less of consequence in the Comparison of Nations, to consider the particular Circumstances of each, by which any Appearances of Virtue in them become more or less considerable; which will very much affect the Question, What Influence a particular Institution has upon any of them? This must often prove a Matter of such nice Disquisition, as cannot be brought to a certain Conclusion: There is another Consideration partly arising from this, which will make reasoning upon such general Comparisons uncertain: That tho' a Country does not appear to be at all improved beyond others, by its particular Scheme of Religion; yet it may be supposed, that, without it, it would have been greatly worse, more generally corrupted and depraved than other Nations: And if this is a true Supposition, then their Religion has had a substan-

tial good Effect, though not apparent in the general Comparifon of that Country with others; the making many virtuous who would not otherwise have been fo, and preventing that Growth of Wickednefs which otherwise would have taken place.

The true way therefore to judge with Certainty, is to begin with confidering what fuch a Religion is in itfelf: And if it evidently appears, as I have already fhown in the prefent Queftion, that it contains in it the wifeft and moft effectual Method of forming the Tempers and Manners of Mankind to Virtue; then plaufible Allegations of its want of Succefs, founded on general Comparifons, ought not to leffen the Reputation of it; on the other hand, Inftances of any good Confequences, which have followed on the Introduction of it, are in this Cafe juftly to be admitted as further Confirmations of its Ufe-fulnefs; there is Reason further to conclude, that without it the World would have been generally more vicious; if it has not had all the Succefs which were to be wifhed and expected, this muft be owing to fome foreign Causes.

Let us further obferve, as to the Fact of want of Succefs alledged againft Chriftianity; that to give the Objection any Force it muft be faid, that Chriftianity never had any good Effect, at no Time, and in no Nation where it hath
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appeared: For if it has ever succeeded in reforming any Set of People, this will be a sufficient Justification of its good Tendency, which hath already appeared in considering the Nature of it.

Now then, as I have already shown that the Christian Religion is in itself excellently calculated for reforming Mankind, and promoting Virtue; so there is Reason to believe it hath had considerable good Influence, and still continues to have. This was most observable upon the first Appearance of it. The World was then greatly corrupted; the grossest Vices abounded every where, of which the Apostle gives a most black Catalogue, *Rom. i. from v. 22.* The most barbarous, the most lascivious Rites, made Part of the Religion of many Countries. But as Men embraced Christianity, a remarkable Change appeared in their Tempers and Morals: The cruel and unjust, who had *lived in Malice and Envy* *, became charitable, kind and humane; from being lewd and intemperate, *-serving divers Lusts and Pleasures*, they became sober and chaste. Such a wonderful Change does the Apostle describe to have been wrought upon the Christians of *Corinth*, People who had been sunk in Luxury and Debauchery of all kinds; *1 Cor. vi. 9, 10, 11.* representing some of the most

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* *Tit. iii. 3.*

monstrously wicked Characters; *such*, says he, *were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified, in the Name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.* For some of the first Ages of Christianity, Christians generally continued to *shine as Lights in the World*, and were distinguished as Patterns of all Virtue. Their Justice, their Charity and Liberality, not only toward one another, but toward all Men, are acknowledged by their very Enemies *. Of such unblemished Lives was the Bulk of them, that their Persecutors themselves, as much as their Honour and Reputation were concerned to find out something blamable in them, could not pretend to charge them with any thing but a tenacious Adherence to their Religion, which they condemned as Superstition †. Their Patience and Constancy of Mind in a Course of Sufferings were particularly remarkable; their forgiving Disposition toward their Enemies; their steadfast Adherence to the Dictates of their Consciences, in the Face of Death, and amidst the greatest Tortures. Here was not only one Instance, or a few, of the most heroick Virtue; but great Numbers of them, for a considerable Course of Time: A strong Demonstration of the Pow-

* Julian. Misap. & 49. ep. ad Arfac. lib. 10. ep. 97.

† Plin. Trajano,

er of Christianity to exalt the Mind above things external, and to fortify it against Hardships in a Course of Virtue! Thus it was in the Beginnings of Christianity. And though in succeeding Ages, and in the present Time, its Success has not appeared so considerable; yet there is Reason to believe, that the World has all along enjoyed something of its happy Influence. I hope I may indulge the Pleasure of saying with Truth, that to this Day, even in these Times of great Degeneracy, some are reclaimed from their vicious Courses by the preaching of the Gospel; not merely changed from a Course of Debauchery, to Enthusiasm and Superstition; but converted to substantial Piety and Goodness, which they shew in the uniform Course of a regular, virtuous and useful Life. And as it must be owned, that there are many Christians exemplary in their Lives for every thing which is good and laudable; to say that they would have been the same without Christianity, is to speak altogether at random: Such, with the Character they have for Honesty and Integrity, will testify, that they feel the Force of Christian Principles, the Power of the Love of Christ, of the Faith of a glorious Immortality, of the awful Prospects of a future Judgment; animating them to good and worthy Actions, checking the Motions of

irregular Passion, and fortifying them against Temptations.

Perhaps it may be said, that good Men do virtuous Actions from an immediate Propensity to them, without turning over in their Minds certain Considerations, either of a religious or moral Nature; they relieve the distress, they perform Acts of Friendship and Generosity, as the immediate natural Dictates of a benevolent Heart; they go on uniformly in this Course, from an immediate prevailing Love of Goodness. This I may grant to be generally true: But it does not follow from this, that the Considerations of Christianity are of no use; the Influence of these is not confined to the Time of their being the actual Subject of our Thoughts. The Christian has felt the Use of them formerly, stopping him when he was engaged perhaps in a Career of Wickedness; putting him upon those Exercises of Mind, and those resolute Attempts in Goodness, which were the Means, by the Blessing of God, of forming in him the fixed Habits of Goodness. He still finds it of great Use, to have his Mind frequently exercised in the Contemplation of God and divine things; the Love of the Redeemer, and what he hath done and suffered for Sinners; the grand Discoveries of a future eternal World; the Glories and Felicities of the heavenly State: By these Meditations often renewed,

newed, the Principles of Virtue are fed and nourished, and gather Strength. On all important Occasions of acting, and when strong Temptations present themselves, he finds great Benefit in calling up these Views to his Mind; for awakning in him all good Dispositions, and inspiring him with necessary Courage and Resolution. There is an habitual Disposition to think of these things, which readily brings them to a Man's Mind on all Occasions of Importance. When at any time he goes astray, by means of these Considerations he is disposed to the renewed Exercise of Repentance, and is recovered into the Paths of Duty.

But perhaps, however some may feel the good Influence of Christianity, it does not appear in a general View of Mankind, that the Christian World at present is more virtuous, or less vicious, than some Heathen Countries. Now, besides what I observed before, of the Uncertainty which will many times be found in such general Comparisons; it cannot be said, with any appearance of Truth, that the Comparison will universally turn out in this Shape; that the Generality of professed Christians are no better, than the Generality of Pagans through the World, are or have ever been; or that the Christian Part of the World never did, in former times, shew any Superiority in its
Morals

Morals to the rest of Mankind. As this cannot be maintained, it still remains, that Christianity hath had good Influence upon Mankind. And if we in these times who profess this Religion, should have Reason to acknowledge with regret, that we are generally no better than our Neighbours; there is sufficient Ground to believe, greatly indeed to our own Disadvantage, but in Vindication of our Religion, that without it we should have been very much worse. The Nature and Tendency of our Religion justifies the Assertion: and besides, I am afraid we have unhappy Experience in these times to support it. As Infidelity hath made considerable Progress of late Years, so it is too evident that Vice of all Sorts hath spread at the same time, and is become more generally and openly practised. As Attempts have been made to overthrow the Principles of Christianity, so have there been Attacks on the Foundations of Virtue and Morality, the unchangeable Difference of moral Good and Evil. Honour, Honesty, disinterested Friendship and publick Spirit, are made a jest of by many, as well as Religion and Revelation. I would not *talk deceitfully* in the Cause I am maintaining; but I think a very small Observation of the World must convince us, that many, finding themselves strongly checked in an Indulgence to their
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Lusts, by these Principles of Christianity in which they have been brought up, have set themselves to get free of these, that they might be easy in a vicious Course; and that together with these Principles, they have shaken off all Sense of Virtue and Goodness, and so abandoned themselves to every Vice. Thus, as by the fatal Effects of Luxury and Debauchery, a Person is made sensible of the Advantage of a sober temperate Diet; so feeling the bad Effects of Infidelity, we may from these learn the good Influence of Christianity, so far as it maintains its Ground.

As there is good Reason then to believe, that Christianity has had a great deal more Influence than the Objection against it would allow; so,

4. That it hath not been still more considerable for its Influence is very clearly to be accounted for from such Causes, as to leave no Blame on the Christian Religion itself. Thus,

(1.) It is easy to see how the best Institution of Religion, and effectual with respect to many, should not have the same good Effect upon all; some being peculiarly hardened in Wickedness. As this may be the Case with particular Persons, so it may with certain Nations: They may be generally so far sunk in Vice, so far lost to all Sense of Goodness, that no Means prove effectual for reclaiming them; not the same Means which have had

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remarkable Influence upon others: They may be so hard and inflexible in their Tempers, that, with the greatest Pains taken on them, they may be far excelled by others who have not had near the like Advantages. Such was the Character of the *Jews* in our Saviour's Time: *The Men of Nineveh*, says he, *shall rise in Judgment with this Generation and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonas, and behold a greater than Jonas is here*, Matth. xii. 41. In the Beginnings of Christianity, before other Causes appeared to defeat its Influence, and when this was most remarkably to be seen in the *Bulk* of its Professors; we may easily conceive how there should be *some*, peculiarly confirmed in vicious Habits, whom it should not prevail upon to their thorow Reformation; some, I mean, who in a sort believed and embraced it. Such I suppose were struck with a Sense of the Excellency of the Christian Doctrine, and with the Miracles wrought in confirmation of it, which engaged a kind of Assent to it, and made a strong Impression on them: By the Influence of this they were probably reclaimed for a while; but in a little time their old vicious Habits, deeply rooted in them, sprung up again, and assumed their former Possession; in opposition to all the Force of the Christian Do-

Doctrines which they had in a fort embraced. This is sometimes taken notice of by the Apostles; That some, *after having known the way of Righteousness, turned from the holy Commandment**. The Consequence of this perhaps *commonly* was, their giving up with the Christian Profession: But with *some* we may believe the Effect might be different; that Shame, or even a kind of religious Awe, made them still continue in that Profession; and then the next Shift was, as Mens Passions have a strange Power over their Judgments, to accommodate their Notions of Christianity to their prevailing Inclinations. And this

(2.) Brings forth another great and very general Cause of the corrupt Lives of Christians, and of the small Advancement of Virtue, in progressive Ages to this Day; the Corruptions introduced into the Christian Religion. As these were originally owing to Mens corrupt Inclinations, so they have further made way for, and encouraged, an Indulgence to them. These Corruptions sprung up very early. In the Days of the Apostles, as appears from their Epistles, there were some who laid Stress on a bare Knowledge and belief of Christianity, as sufficient to Salvation, without a good Life and Practice; and others who laid the Weight of Christianity

* 2 Pet. ii. 21.

nity on certain outward Observances, which they wanted to introduce among Christians, as of the greatest Importance; such as Circumcision, and a superstitious Distinction of certain Days and Meats. Thus losing Sight of the End of Christianity, the improving and perfecting our Natures in a Conformity to God, and making it consist in mere Speculation, they *turned aside unto vain Jangling*: they fell a *doting about Questions and Strifes of Words*; *striving about Words to no Profit*, which led aside from godly edifying, tended to the *subverting of the Hearers*, and *increased unto more ungodliness**; they took up with *Commandments of Men which turned from the Truth†*, and made these fill up the Place of real Religion. The Apostle observing these fatal Beginnings, foretells the further Progress of them, *2 Tim. iv. 3. 4. For the Time will come when they will not endure sound Doctrine; but after their own Lusts shall they heap to themselves Teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their Ears from the Truth, and they shall be turned unto Fables*. Thus hath the Christian Religion come to be perplexed with intricate and useless Disputes, of no Importance to the Interests of real Piety and Goodness; and to be loaded with pompous superstitious Rites, which

* 2 Tim. ii. 14. 16. † Tit. i. 14;

which only amuse the Fancy, but have no Tendency to better the Heart. About these hath the Christian World been divided into Parties, each very often placing the Main of Christianity in their distinguishing Opinions and outward Forms; and in contending with one another about these, the substantial practical Design of Christianity hath been overlooked. This hath shown our Religion to the World in a bad Light; as if it consisted in useless Speculations and outward Forms, of no Consequence to Virtue and the Happiness of Mankind; and the Prejudice thus raised hath been helped forward, by the bad Influence all this must have had on the Characters and Lives of Christians, leading many of them to be careless of real Goodness, and easy in an Indulgence to their Vices, as thinking to make up for this by a sound Belief and great Zeal in the way of a Party.

(3.) These Corruptions being once introduced into the Christian Religion, and having naturally a bad Influence on the Morals of Christians; we all know the force of bad example, to spread and propagate the Mischief. An Example being once set of a bad Life joined with a Profession of Christianity, others are insensibly engaged, or even encouraged, to follow it; looking upon the one as quite reconcileable with the other: and Inclination leading the way to Deceit, they

they readily embrace the same corrupt Principles of Religion, by which others make themselves easy in their vicious Courses.

(4.) To all this let us add, That Christianity being once the received Religion of a Country, many, for worldly Interests and Connections, maintain the outward Profession of it, whose Minds are noway taken up about it; who are not at the Pains to consider, either what it is in itself, or what it is represented to be by others, but only find it for their Purpose to keep up the established Forms of Religion. Of such it is not to be expected that their Lives should be influenced by it, as they have no thought at all about it. However such still retaining the Christian Name, contribute to the general Reproach brought upon it; as they increase the Wickedness committed under that Name and Profession.

Now when all these things are considered together: That the peculiar Obstinacy of vicious Habits in some, must originally have stood in the way of the reforming Influence of Christianity upon them: That by the vicious Inclinations of some, and the Superstition of others, the Christian Religion hath been gradually corrupted, so as to appear many times quite a different thing from what it originally is, a *Doctrine according to Godliness*; to the evident Hindrance of its native

tive good Tendency : When we consider how great an Influence Example must have had, to spread the Mischief, and help forward the growing Corruption and Wickedness of Christians ; by which means they must become more and more hardned against the good Influence of pure Christianity : When all these things are considered ; it may justly seem a Wonder, that, at this time of the World, the Efficacy of Christianity should in any sort appear ; that true Christianity should have been so far recovered out of the Rubbish of Popish Error and Superstition, in which it seemed almost buried ; that with all the Inclination many People still have, to form a Christianity to themselves indulgent to their Humours and Passions, the natural Truth and Goodness of it should so far shine forth, and exert themselves to such a Degree upon the Minds of many, as there is reason to believe it does : This I cannot but think a strong Evidence of the original Excellency and native good Influence of it, which all the Wickedness of Men can't overcome ; and of a divine Power still going along with it.

Thus far I hope I have shown, that no just Objection lies against the Excellency and Usefulness of pure original Christianity, from a Supposition founded on the bad Lives of many Christians, of its not having any

Influence in reforming and improving Mankind: It hath in itself the most powerful Tendency to this; it is in this respect all consistent with itself, having nothing in it to defeat this good Tendency; there is reason to believe it hath actually had considerable Influence, in advancing and supporting the Interest of Virtue; that it hath not had greater Success is plainly to be accounted for, so as not at all to lessen the Reputation of it. But,

Second. It is further urged in the Argument against Christianity, which I am considering, that supposing it hath had some Influence in making Men good and virtuous, more than they would otherwise have been; yet by the bad Purposes to which it has been improved, it hath done more Hurt than Good. What these are I formerly mentioned; its being made a Tool to serve worldly and ambitious Views, a Pretence for covering over most villanous Designs; its giving rise to fatal Divisions among Christians, and the most cruel Persecutions. To vindicate Christianity with respect to these things, and against the Argument now formed upon them, let us attend to the following Considerations.

I. Christianity itself is far from giving Countenance to these Abuses, or from promoting the perverse Dispositions which lead

to them. It is far from encouraging Mens worldly and ambitious Passions. On the contrary it recommends to us Humility, as the Character which will make us *great in the Kingdom of Heaven**: It requires us, as we would be the true Disciples of Christ, to *deny our selves, and take up our Cross*†; to disengage our selves from the Honours and Enjoyments of this World, and prepare our selves to bear Hardships, Reproaches and Persecutions in the ways of Religion: It represents the prevailing Love of the World, *the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life*‡, as inconsistent with the sincere Love of God: It sets before us in our blessed Lord and Master, as the justest Object of our Love and Imitation, the most glorious Pattern of *Meekness and Lowliness of Heart**: The more effectually to subdue our worldly Passions, it teaches us to *lay up for our selves Treasures in Heaven*†, and overlook the *Fashion of this World as passing away*‡; to seek *those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right Hand of God*; to set our Affections on *things above, not on things on the Earth**. Particularly as to those who were to be the Teachers of Christianity, our blessed Saviour, in express Words condemns in them, all Affectati-

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* Matth. xviii. 4. † Matth. xvi. 24. ‡ 1 Joh. ii. 15. 16.
 * Matth. xi. 29. † Matth. vi. 19. 20. ‡ 1 Cor. vii. 31.
 * Col. iii. 1. 2.

fection of worldly Dominion and Grandeur; *Matth. xx. 25.—28. The Princes of the Gentiles exercise Dominion over them, but it shall not be so among you; but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your Minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your Servant; even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.* That spiritual Tyranny over the Faith and Consciences of Men which has proved so mischievous in the Christian World, is most contrary to Christianity; to the Spirit and Conduct, as well as the Exhortations, of the first Preachers of it: *Not for that we have Dominion over your Faith,* says the Apostle Paul, *but are Helpers of your Joy **; and the Apostle Peter exhorts Christian Pastors to behave *not as Lords over God's Heritage †*.

Christianity does by no means tend to promote Divisions among Christians. As it very plainly shows what it lays the greatest Stress upon, *Faith working by Love, the edifying of the Body of Christ in Love; the Doctrine which is according to Godliness*; so with respect to lesser Differences of Opinion in Matters of Religion, which have no necessary Connection with the great Design of it, it teaches us to *forbear one another in Love ‡, to keep the Unity of the*

* 2 Cor. i. 24. † 1 Pet. v. 3. ‡ Col. iii. 13.

the Spirit in the Bond of Peace *, to remain united in the Acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as our only Lord and Master.

Christianity is the farthest that can be imagined from favouring any thing of Hatred, Violence and Persecution, in the Cause of Truth. These are directly opposite to the Genius of the Gospel; which all over breaths a Spirit of Love, is founded in the Acknowledgment of a God who is Love, is designed to train us up to the Perfection of Love. Such Dispositions and Practices are quite contrary to the Temper and Character of our blessed Saviour; the whole of whose Appearance in our Nature, was a continued Expression of the greatest, the most invincible, Love and Goodwill toward Men. Any thing of Violence and Cruelty in promoting his Religion, or what we think Truth, is condemned both by the Example of our Lord, and by his express Instructions to his Disciples. Thus, *Luke ix. 53, &c.* when the *Samaritans* would *not receive him*, and the Disciples, animated by that flaming Zeal which hath often wrought so much Mischief in the World, would have been at *commanding Fire to come down from Heaven and consume them; he turned and rebuked them and said, ye know not what manner of Spirit ye are of; for the Son of Man is*

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* Eph. iv. 32

not come to destroy Mens Lives but to save them: An Argument which for ever condemns such a Spirit of Severity, as quite opposite to, and destructive of, the Design of our Saviour's coming into the World. To the same Purpose we are taught to *shew all Meekness unto all Men* *; that *the Servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all Men, apt to teach, patient, in Meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them Repentance to the acknowledging of the Truth* †: That *the Wrath of Man worketh not the Righteousness of God* ‡; that *the Fruit of Righteousness is sown in Peace*, as the only proper Soil which favours its Rise and Growth. One single Expression in a Parable, *compel them to come in* **, can never be understood in a Sense contradictory to, so many clear and express Declarations against the Use of Violence in Religion; but must be meant, agreeable to these, according to the Genius of the Parable itself, and as the like Phrases are often used in Scripture ††, of earnest Persuasion and pressing Intreaties. Whatever Stress Christianity lays upon that *Faith which worketh by Love*; for *mere Belief*, as I said,

* Tit. iii. 2. † 2 Tim. ii. 24, 25. ‡ Jam. i. 20, and iii. 13,---18. ** Luke xiv. 23. †† See Matth. xiv. 22. Gal. ii. 14. Luke xxiv. 29. Acts xvi. 15.

said, it lays no manner of Stress upon; it would by no means dispose us to hate, even those whom we believe to be out of the way of Salvation; but on the contrary, to love all Mankind; and, in imitation of our Saviour, to *have Compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way* †: Not to torture their Bodies, or plunder their Estates, for the Salvation of their Souls; but, as the only proper and likely way to succeed, to endeavour to convince them by Reason and Argument, and to recommend our Religion to their Affections, by shewing it in our Behaviour a Religion friendly to all the human kind, a Religion of Love, Meekness and Peace. So far is Christianity itself from being chargeable with these Abuses, which have been committed under this sacred Name; so that it cannot indeed be said to have *done* any Hurt at all.

2. To clear it fully from the Charge, it may be evident from what other Causes these Abuses proceed. It is plainly the Wickedness of Mankind, which prostituted the best thing in the World to the worst Designs, the Purposes of Ambition and Tyranny. It is indeed the extraordinary Goodness of Christianity, which hath made Men so fond of assuming a Pretence of it for covering over their bad Designs, that they might carry them

them on the more successfully: And if it was to be loaded with all the Mischiefs, which have been done under the agreeable Shew of it; in this Way, Virtue, Friendship, Generosity, every thing that is truly good, might be chargeable with all the Crimes and Villanies of Hypocrisy; because this often acts its Part under these amiable Appearances.

As to Contentions, Cruelties and Barbarities, exercised by Christians on a religious Account; these proceed from such Causes as have nothing to do with true Christianity. Such as, that false religious Zeal which belongs to Enthusiasm and Superstition; when People have not been at Pains to exercise their Reason and Judgment in religious Matters, but have given themselves up to the Dictates of wild Fancy and Imagination, and are governed by mere Passion in these Matters; from this springs Rage and Fury in behalf of what is fancied sacred and divine. This is not a thing peculiar to the Christian World, but hath been found in other religious Professions. Together with this false Zeal, there is Pride and Conceit, which is quite distinct from Regard to the Interests of Truth, disposing a Man to take it very much amiss that others should differ from his Opinions and dispute his Judgment, and so possessing him with Illwill against them. This hath appeared most remarkable.

markable in those who have assumed an absolute Dominion over the Faith and Consciences of Men; and who, by getting Power into their Hands, have had Opportunity of exercising their Resentment against such as presumed to assert the native Freedom of their Minds, by judging for themselves in religious Affairs. With Self-conceit and false Zeal hath often concurred Regard to worldly Views and Interests, which have depended on supporting such a religious Party; the maintaining of the extravagant Riches and Grandeur of a certain Order of Men. Thus the Zeal of the *Ephesians* for their great Goddess *Diana*, was blown up by a powerful Consideration of worldly Interest*; *Sirs, ye know that by this Craft we have our Wealth: That the Craft was in danger to be set at nought*, introduced more effectually the other Argument; that *the Temple of the Goddess should be despised, and her Magnificence destroyed*. Worldly Views often intermix insensibly with blind Zeal in the same Person; that it is not easy for him to distinguish in himself, the Workings of the different Passions concurring to the same Action: And very often the Zeal of the simple and ignorant sort hath been employed as a Tool, to serve the ambitious Purposes of those in Power. This I believe hath very ge-

* *Acts* xix. 25, 27.

generally been the Case. As the blind Zeal I am speaking of is mostly to be found with the weaker sort of People, who have had smaller Advantages for Improvement in Knowledge, so this alone would have had but little Effect: It would seldom have gone further than illnatured Speeches and Invectives; sometimes it might have risen into Mobs and Tumults; but would hardly have produced such a Train of cruel Persecutions, if it had not been for designing Men at the Helm of Affairs. They, to serve their selfish and ambitious Purposes, or support their Pride and Tyranny, have first artfully inflamed the Fury of the Multitude, against those whom they had a mind to destroy, as Enemies to God and Religion; and then, having got the Multitude on their Side, have proceeded with their Concurrence, and under the pious Pretence of Zeal, to the Destruction of such as they had marked out for Hereticks and Infidels.—As these Mischiefs then have proceeded from such Causes, as are common to all Professions among Mankind; so,

3. We find that the mischievous Effects have not been confined to Christian Times and Countries, but have happened in other Ages and Places of the World. I own it would be but a sorry Defence of Christians, to say, that the like Wickedness has been

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committed by others: But I am not at all defending *Christians*; but vindicating *their Religion* from an unjust Imputation, as if it had peculiarly given Rise to Mischief which hath no where else appeared.— It is by no means peculiar to Christianity, that a Pre-
 tence of Religion hath been employed to abuse the Vulgar or well-meaning Part of Mankind, and make them ignorantly serve the ambitious or wicked Purposes of crafty Men: This is a thing which hath been often practised. It is not only in the Christian World, that Enthusiasm or Superstition has appeared in most hideous Effects: In the heathen World, have they not produced the most monstrous Barbarities? the offering up of human Sacrifices, the making their Children to pass through the Fire as Burnt-offerings to their Gods; People's mangling their own Flesh, and subjecting themselves to Tortures and Death, under a Notion of Religion and doing Honour to their Deities. Such abominable Rites have been very common in many Pagan-countries, both in ancient and later Times; and to this Day are they practised in some Places of the World, according to Accounts we have given of them*; And is it not to be reckoned to the
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* Acoft. Hist. des Ind. l. 5. ch. 19, 20. 21. Careri Voyage au tour du Monde, tom. 6me, p. 51, 52, 80. Christianity as old as the Creation, p. 80.

Account of Christianity in this Question, that it hath freed the World where it hath appeared, of these execrable Pieces of religious Service?— Nor is a false mischievous Zeal, committing Violence in the Cause of Religion, chargeable only upon Christians. We find that in *Egypt*† they were remarkable for the most implacable and envenomed hatred of one another, and the most cruel and bloody Contentions, on account of their different Gods and Worship. In *Athens*, was not *Socrates* judicially condemned and put to Death because he did not acknowledge the Gods of the Republick‡, but maintained, and taught the Youth, juster Notions of a Supreme Being? And several others* were banished, or condemned to Death, on a religious Account. Such Instances as these make it not improbable, that if we had as full an Account transmitted to us of the different religious Sects among the Heathens, as we have of those in the Christian Church, many more

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† Vide Juven. Sat. 15. l. 33. ad l. 93. ‡ Xenoph. Mem. Socr. l. 1. ab init. * There were, *Diagoras*, *Protagoras*, *Stilpo*; vid *Suidas* in *Diag.* *Cic. de nat. D. l. 1.* *Diogen. Laert. in vit. Protag. & Stilp.* *Anaxagoras* too, according to some Accounts; vid. *Diogen. Laert. in vit. Anaxag. Josephus* mentioning such Examples as these, says of the *Athenians* in general, That if any so much as spoke a Word concerning the Gods which was not agreeable to their Law, they were sure to punish them: *Cont. Appian l. 2. C. 37.* Instances of the persecuting Spirit in several Heathen Countries, see a particular Account of in the *Rev. Mr. Chandler's Hist. of persecut. Book. 1.*

Examples of this sort would appear. But what need one go further for these, than the many bloody Persecutions practised by Heathens against the Christians; the Tortures inflicted, and Havock made upon them, at different times for the three first Centuries; and that generally, without their being so much as accused of any thing but their being Christians. Thus we find an Order given against them*, by one of the mildest too of the *Roman* Emperors, that tho' *they were not to be enquired after*, which was a piece of Condescension not always shewn to them, yet *if they were accused, and convicted of being Christians, they should be punished*; only with this Exception, *That if one should deny himself to be a Christian, and purge himself from the Charge by worshipping the received Gods, though formerly suspected, he should be dismissed*. The Christians themselves first felt the Spirit of Persecution, which Zeal for Pagan Religion kindled up against them: What a Pity is it they should ever have copied after so horrid an Example!— In fine, as it was formerly observed, that the Zeal and Bigotry which is generally to be found among the lower sort would hardly have proved so fatal, if it had not been employed as a Tool by designing Men, to serve their ambitious and

* Trajan Plinio, lib. 10. ep. 98.

and worldly Views; that which hath had a main hand in the Mischiefs done among Christians, is no other than that insatiable Spirit of Ambition, which, in other times and Places, without Religion, hath made so much Havock in the World; hath laid great Kingdoms and Cities waste, and hath made Men, under the Name of Heroes, become the common Robbers and Murderers of Mankind. Since then it appears that Christianity hath, at most, been but an innocent Occasion of these Mischiefs which have been done under the Name of it; and not so peculiarly the Occasion of them, but that the like have happened in other Times and Places than in the Christian; let us consider,

4. The remaining Strength of the Objection, which must ly in these two Suppositions: That the Evils to which Christianity hath been misimproved, though not altogether peculiar to it, yet have been greater and more numerous than otherwise have, or would have, happened; and that any Good it hath done, is not sufficient to balance these. — I may at least take upon me to affirm that neither of these can ever be proved, so as to have any Weight to destroy the Reputation of Christianity, against plain Demonstration of its Usefulness and direct Opposition to every thing that's bad, from the Nature and Tendency of it. It is far from appearing with
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any reasonable Evidence, that the Mischiefs committed under the Christian Name have been greater, than any which have otherwise appeared in the World. The contrary may be asserted with at least as great Probability: The barbarous, as well as obscene Rites, which have been practised in many Heathen Countries, perhaps through a Course of Ages to this Day, together with the Persecutions which appear to have taken Place under Pagan Religions; these do at least *bid fair* to balance, the Wickedness and Barbarities which have been committed under the Name of Christianity. To say as a late Author* does, *That if putting innocent and conscientious Men to Death on account of Religion may be called sacrificing them, there have been more human Sacrifices under the Christian Religion, than ever were before in the World*; is a meer random Assertion, and may with great Justice be denied. Upon looking into History it is hard to say, whether Ambition has not committed as much Havock and Destruction in the World by open Force, as by the Help of a religious Pretence, and with the Instrument of false Zeal, in Christian times. As little does it appear certain, that the Mischiefs which have been done under a Profession of Christianity, or as great, would
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* Christianity as old as the Creation, p. 84.

not have happened, tho' this Institution had never taken Place. Christianity has indeed been made the Pretence for them; but so might a Pretence of Religion have been employed under any other Institution: False Zeal, Bigotry and Superstition have been the immediate Instruments of producing them; but these are by no means peculiar to Christians. Nay, supposing that these Abuses of Religion among Christians have been greater than were known in the Pagan World, which yet there is no Reason to grant; it will not follow even on this Supposition, that these greater Abuses would not have happened without the Christian Profession: It is no incredible thing, that some particular Ages and Places should have been remarkably wicked beyond all others; which greater Degree of Wickedness they would have shown, under any religious Institution: Or there may have been, quite independent of the particular Institution of Religion, some special Concurrence of Circumstances, to inflame Men's bad Passions, to unite the blind Zeal of some, with the Craft, the Ambition, the arbitrary and tyrannical Will of others, and to give these more fatal Success.

So little Ground is there to believe, that the Abuse of Christianity hath wrought more Mischief in the World, than would have happened without this Religion: Tho',

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if we were to suppose it to have done so in some Instances, I should not even think this an unaccountable thing, in maintaining the Goodness of Christianity. It is a common Observation that the Corruption of the best things is the worst; and it is conceivable enough how this might hold in the present Case. The better a Religion is, the Pre-
 tence of it for carrying on any wicked Purpose, if once through the Weakness of Mankind it is made to pass, will undoubtedly have the greater Effect. If a Religion lays the strongest Restraints on Mens wicked Passions, it is natural to think, that when once a perverse Mind hath any way found out a Licence to these Passions, they will rage the fiercer; as those who have had the Benefit of a good Education, if once they do shake themselves loose from the Impressions of it, are often observed to prove the more notoriously vicious and debauched.

If indeed the Corruption of a good thing was so great, as to do more Mischief than any Good produced was equal to; it might seem a just Conclusion, that we had better be free of it altogether. But this Argument can have no place here. I am now speaking on the Supposition, that the Abuse of Christianity hath given Rise to greater Evils, than would have fallen out had no such Institution appeared. But so little Ground is
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there in Fact for alledging this, that one of any Candour and Justice must at least suppose, the greater Degree of Mischief thus occasioned by Christianity to be very inconsiderable: So that we have to compare the *doubtful* Supposition, of a *very inconsiderable* Share of Mischief, *peculiarly* occasioned by Christianity, with what hath been represented concerning the good Effects it hath produced, *beyond what would otherwise have taken place*, which in all *Probability* have been *considerably great*. But if these things cannot be so ascertained and balanced with one another as to admit of Demonstration, the thing which ought reasonably to satisfy us is, that Christianity hath evidently the best Tendency, and carries in its Nature the strongest Opposition to every thing that is bad and mischievous. Only give me leave to mention two things further as of Importance in this Comparison.

I. That if the Christian Religion has had any Influence in promoting real Virtue and Goodness, as there is the greatest Reason to believe it has, this is a Benefit of so high a Nature as to balance many external Evils. I hope it is abundantly plain, that Christianity could not have the least Influence in exciting or encouraging Mens bad Passions; but it has been made an Occasion for these to exert themselves, in creating many outward

ward Mischiefs: On the other Hand, it hath a native Tendency to promote real inward Goodness; and so far as it hath succeeded in this, it is a Benefit of such a Nature, as to overballance many external Mischiefs which have occasionally happened by it. It hath thus taught Men to be happy in themselves, independent of outward Enjoyments *; it hath introduced them to inward Pleasures far superior to those of the World; it hath given them a Strength of Mind to enable them to overcome outward Calamities, so as to be less affected by them: And if our Adversaries will allow of a future State, Christianity, in forming Men to Virtue and real Goodness, trains them up to the highest Perfection and Happiness of their Nature in another World.

2. It is to be observed that the Corruption of Christianity, whatever Mischief it hath produced, is only occasional, and is separable from it; the Good done is the native Effect of it, and may therefore be more uniformly expected from it. And this brings us to what I shall make the Conclusion of the whole Argument.

The Christian Religion has the strongest Tendency to reform Mankind, and to advance true Goodness; this Effect we have Reason to believe it has sometimes had in a

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* Prov. xiv. 14.

considerable Measure, and always in some Degree: As this is a good Argument of its divine Original, we have Ground to hope that the divine Blessing will always accompany it, to render it more or less successful. On the other hand; the wicked Purposes to which Christianity has been abused, are but occasional Effects of it, and are separable from it: Accordingly they have not always accompanied it. By the good Hand of God, at the glorious Reformation, a considerable Part of the Christian World did abandon the Tyranny and Corruption of that Church, which has been most remarkable for these Abuses of Christianity; where the persecuting Spirit has reigned, to the Scandal of Humanity itself. We at present in this Part of the World, have Experience of the Possibility of enjoying the Benefit of the Christian Religion, without those gross Abuses of it which have sometimes harrassed Mankind: Though alas the Gospel has not all the good Success we would wish for; yet, blessed be God, we are not so much as in fear of that Violence, of those Cruelties and Barbarities, which it hath been most impiously made to countenance. And why may we not hope that the Blessing of pure Christianity, free from the mischievous Corruptions of it, shall yet become more general; that the great Hindrances to its good
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Success may be removed; and that the Religion of Christ may come to be so well understood, in all those Places where it is professed, as no Villanies or Barbarities shall any more be admitted under the Name of it. Then may the World see these Prophecies fully accomplished, as describing not only the Tendency, but the Effect, of Christianity; *The Wolf shall dwell with the Lamb, the Leopard shall ly down with the Kid, the Calf and the young Lion and the Fatling together, and a little Child shall lead them; the Cow and the Bear shall feed, their young ones shall ly down in Safety, and the Lion shall eat Straw like the Ox; the sucking Child shall play on the Hole of the Asp, and the weaned Child shall put his Hand on the Cockatrice-den; they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy Mountain* *. In his Days, in the Government of the Prince of Peace and Righteousness, shall the Righteous flourish, and abundance of Peace so long as the Moon endureth †. As this is the proper Tendency of true Christianity; is it not the Part of all real Lovers of Mankind, instead of setting themselves in opposition to so excellent an Institution, to contribute for maintaining and promoting the original Purity of it, and thus help forward its native good Influence?

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Thus

* Isa. xi. 6,---9.

† Psal. lxxii. 7.

Thus I hope I have fully vindicated the Christian Religion, as an useful and excellent Institution, from the Occasions of Offence given by Christians; and have shown that the Argument against it founded upon these, is by no means just.

From what hath been said,

I. Let me call upon all Christians to do their Parts for removing these Offences. Tho' we can show in point of Argument, that the Wickedness of professed Christians is no just Objection against their Religion; yet in so far as this Occasion of Prejudice remains, it will still be apt to have its Effect, immediately to prepossess People's Minds, to hinder them from conceiving an Esteem of Christianity, and to keep them off from that fair Inspection into it by which its Excellency and Usefulness would appear obvious. Have we then, my Brethren, any Regard for our blessed Redeemer who died for us, whose Servants we profess to be? And shall we have any Part in making *that worthy Name* to be *blasphemed*, in representing him to the World as *the Minister of Sin*, and his Religion as an useless, or even hurtful Institution? Have we any Love to our Fellow-creatures; and shall it not affect us to think what Hurt is done to them by these Offences? preventing their Recovery from Sin and Misery, to Goodness and Happiness:
All

All the unspeakable Benefit and Comfort of the Christian Revelation; the *Knowledge of Salvation by the Remission of Sins, through the tender Mercies of our God; a Light to them that sit in Darkness and in the Shadow of Death, to guide their Feet into the way of Peace**; all this, are they by means of these Prejudices unhappily deprived of. Have we any Concern for our own Honour? Let us consider what a Reproach Christians bring upon themselves by their vicious Lives. They are either look'd upon, according to the bad Light in which they represent Christianity, as blindly devoted to a Set of mere Speculations and Forms, which are of no Significancy: Or else, as grossly inconsistent; valuing themselves on a Religion, as far superior to all others, containing the most excellent System of Precepts, and the most useful Discoveries for forming Mens Hearts and Lives to Virtue; and yet themselves no better than other Men, indulging in the same Vices with others, or perhaps perverting this very Religion they boast of to wicked Purposes. To them are justly to be applied these Words of Reproach; *Rom. ii. 17, &c. Thou who makest thy Boast of God, and knowest his Will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed by a revealed Law; and art con-*

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* Luke i. 77, 78, 79.

fidest that thou thyself art a Guide of the blind, a Light of them that are in Darkness: Thou that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest a Man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayst a Man should not commit Adultery, dost thou commit Adultery? Thou that abhorrest Idols, dost thou commit Sacrilege? Thou that makest thy Boast of the Law, a Law expressly revealed by God, through breaking the Law dishonourest thou God? How should we further be awakened, by the peculiar Denuntiation of Wrath against those who concur in such Offences! Wo to that Man by whom the Offence cometh. To such belongs the Guilt, of dishonouring the Name and Religion of Christ; of treacherously betraying his Cause, and exposing it to an infidel World; of putting a Stumbling-block before the blind; of hardning Men in the ways of Error and Destruction, against the great Means of their Recovery and Salvation: So great Guilt must needs incur the severest Condemnation. Let it then be our Care, by all means to avoid giving such Offences; and let it be at Heart with us, for the Honour of our Religion, for the further spreading of it, in order to the greatest Good of the World, to have these Occasions of Prejudice against it as much as possible removed.*

This

1 * Lev. xix. 14.

This concerns all of us in our several Stations. As we *name the Name of Christ*, let us *depart from all Iniquity*, and *abstain from all Appearance of Evil* *. And as much as we have the Uneasiness, 'to see others bringing a Reproach upon their Religion by their scandalous Practices; let it be our Care so much the more to *adorn the Doctrine of God our Saviour*, by a pious and useful Life †: *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, or venerable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good Report, if there be any Virtue and if there be any Praise*; let us *think on these things*, and by them adorn our Character and Behaviour. Particularly let us shew by our Conduct, that we hold in just Abhorrence all those Evils, to which the Christian Religion hath been misimproved; all uncharitable Heats and Animosities; Divisions about things on which real Goodness hath no Dependence; all Bitterness and Severity towards those whom we conceive to be in a wrong way; whatever favours in the least of a persecuting Spirit. In all our Appearances for the Christian Cause, let us be careful to *Speak the Truth in Love* ‡; and thus recom-

* 2 Tim. ii. 19. 1 Theff. v. 22. † Tit. ii. 10. Phil. iv. 8.
‡ Eph. iv. 15.

recommend it to Mens Affections, by shewing it in our Temper and Behaviour, as a Religion every way humane and friendly to Mankind, designed for their *Salvation* and not their *Destruction*.

All this is especially incumbent on the Teachers of Christianity: A great deal lies upon them, for removing these Grounds of Prejudice against it. It is of great consequence what Views they give of the Christian Religion, particularly in their publick Instructions: That they possess People with just Notions of it, as a Religion calculated for making Men holy and good; and direct all their Instructions to this as the great Design of them: *That they strive not about Words to no Profit, but to the subverting of the Hearers; but keep to wholesom Words, by which the true Life and Health of the Soul may be promoted, even the Words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Doctrine which is according to Godliness: That they preach Christ crucified**, to the Purpose for which he was crucified; the *redeeming us from all Iniquity, and purifying unto himself a peculiar People zealous of good Works; that we being dead to Sin should live unto Righteousness†*. As such act in a publick Character, and are therefore exposed to general Observation,

* Cor. i. 23.

† 1 Pet. ii. 24.

vation, it is especially requisite that their Lives should be a Copy of what they preach; that in these they should give to the World an experimental Proof of the good practical Influence of Christianity. It is of general Concern, that such should adorn their Station by a meek and humble Behaviour, by *Simplicity and godly Sincerity*†; that they should never think to employ ill natured and angry Passions in the Cause of Christ; that they should avoid every thing of that Craft and Deceit in managing religious Matters, which has sometimes passed under the Name of pious Frauds; that they should shew a just Opposition to that worldly and ambitious Spirit, which has sometimes exerted itself under the Pretence of Zeal for Religion, and the Interests of the Church; that they should never pretend to assume a *Dominion* over the *Faith* and Consciences of Men, *as Lords over God's Heritage*. These and the like Offences, it particularly belongs to those of the ministerial Order to remove.

2. Whoever else may be offended at Christ and his Religion, yet let us never be offended*. Let us attend to the true Nature and Design of our Religion, in which its Excellency, and the Characters of a divine Original appear most conspicuous; and by the View of these, become fixed in a just Esteem

of

† 2 Cor. i. 12. * Matth. xxvi. 33.

of it. Let us endeavour constantly to keep up a lively Impression of the great Discoveries of Christianity, that these may strengthen and improve in us all the habitual Dispositions of Goodness; and thus shall we have *the Witness in our selves* †, of its Goodness and Excellency, in the happy Influence of it upon our own Hearts. Let us think it our Honour bear the Christian Name, and never be made ashamed of it by unjust Reproaches thrown upon it: As we know very well where these Reproaches ought to ly, upon the wicked Professors of Christianity, and not upon Christianity itself; let us never be put out of Countenance by ill-placed Raillery. Let it be our Care, for our Parts, animated by that *Faith which worketh by Love*, to give a shining Example of all Virtue and Goodness; and this will reasonably support our glorying in our Christian Profession.

3. Having vindicated Christianity as a most excellent and useful Institution, and therefore worthy of God, let me exhort all in their several Stations, to lend an helping Hand for the further Propagation of it. From the Love we owe to our blessed Saviour, let us heartily concur in our Endeavours for the Advancement of his Kingdom, for bringing others into Subjection to his happy Government, for promoting his kind Designs for the Sal-

† 1 Joh. v. 10.

Salvation of Sinners. As we regard the most valuable Interests of Mankind, shall we not be ready to do our utmost for bringing them to the Knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, whom to know is *Life eternal**? How should it affect our Hearts, to think how many *Places of the Earth are yet in Darkness, and full of the Habitations of Cruelty*; and that in the remoter Corners of our own Country, many People are still living in downright Heathen Ignorance and Barbarity, or under the Dominion of Popish Superstition and Delusion! Would we not wish to have it in our Power, to do something for the Recovery of our Brethren of Mankind out of these unhappy Circumstances? And what a Pleasure may it be to us, my Brethren, that we have an Opportunity given us for this Purpose, an Opportunity at hand, by means of a *Society for propagating Christian Knowledge*.

A good many Years ago, many well-disposed Persons, very much affected with the deplorable State of the remoter Highlands and Islands of *Scotland*, which were lost in Ignorance, Superstition, and all manner of Vice, *perishing for lack of Knowledge*, and in a great measure useless to the World; did think of the most effectual Method of recovering them out of this State, to true Piety
and

* *Joh. xvii. 3.*

and Virtue, by having the Knowledge of the true Religion conveyed to them. Accordingly they were, by a Royal Patent, erected into a Society for this Purpose. This Society hath consisted of many honourable Gentlemen and worthy Ministers, who have had this Design most seriously at Heart, and have been most diligent and faithful in the Execution of it, by the Means afforded them. They have been countenanced by Providence in a considerable Measure, and encouraged by many pious and liberal Donations: They are further assisted in their Undertaking by an annual Bounty from his Majesty, given for the same Purpose of the Reformation of the Highlands and Islands, the Managers of which correspond with the Society in their Measures. By these Means, the good Design hath been carried a considerable Length; a great many Schools have been erected, and itinerant Preachers and Catechists employed; and there have been very satisfying Accounts from many Places of their Success, in bringing People to the Knowledge of *the Truth as it is in Jesus*, and, as the just and native Consequence of this, the civilizing of their Manners in a good Degree. The Society have likewise, as part of their original Design, begun to extend their pious Endeavours Abroad, and to send Missionaries into foreign Parts, for the Instruction and Conversion

version of Infidels; and will be ready to go on with these worthy Attempts, as they shall be further enabled by charitable Persons. They have further been impowered of late by a second Royal Patent, to extend their Views to the promoting of Labour and Industry, by bringing up Children educated at their Schools to Husbandry, Trades, or Manufactures, so far as they shall be assisted by charitable Contributions for this Purpose: According to this Extent of their Powers, they will doubtless have it at Heart, that the Purposes of Religion and of Civil Society be carried on jointly, as they always ought to be; and that while young People are instructed in necessary Christian Knowledge, they shall at the same time be trained up early to an Habit of Industry, and so made useful Members of the Commonwealth: In this way they would Hope to recover these distant Corners of the Country, at once from profound Ignorance, and from prevailing Idleness, and Theft, and other Vices accompanying these, by which they have been lost to the Publick. As an Instance of the Society's forward Disposition to promote whatever belongs to the useful Education of poor Children, I cannot but take notice, as now present to our View, of the Orphan Hospital of this City, which they have taken under their Patronage and Inspection; where

where there are just now to the Number of eighty Boys and Girles, at the same time instructed in the Principles of Christianity, and brought up to useful Business: As they are here presented before you, you have the Satisfaction to see, to what good Purpose the liberal Contributions of many in this City, and in other Places, have been bestowed, in encouraging this Hospiral.

Now from all this, my Brethren, you may see what a favourable Opportunity you have of promoting the greatest and most valuable Design, by means of a Society who have given Proof of their Zeal and Faithfulness in this worthy Undertaking. The Advances they have already made are indeed in some respect considerable: But when we think how many People still in these remoter Places of our Country, and what vast Numbers of Mankind in other Parts of the World, are still wandering in the Paths of Ignorance and Vice, destitute of the Means of Instruction and Reformation; what is yet done is but a happy beginning, and strongly calls for the charitable Assistance of those to whom God hath given the good things of this World. In this you are called to contribute, for advancing the Knowledge and Glory of the Redeemer; and by this means *converting Sinners from the Error of their way**, *saving Souls from*
Death,

Death, and turning many to Righteousness †. And can you spare nothing of your Riches from the Delicacy and Pomp of this World, to be employed for so noble a Purpose? Shall the Luxury, the Pleasures and Diversions of Life, be preferred to the divine Pleasure of doing so great and lasting Good? God, in bestowing upon you these good things of Life, hath given you Opportunity, by means of them, to become *rich in good Works**, and by the religious and virtuous Improvement of these *uncertain* Enjoyments, *to lay up for your selves in Store a good Foundation for the time to come.*

To conclude, let us join with all our pious and honest Endeavours, our earnest Prayers to God for Success; that the *Truth which is after Godliness* may come to be universally spread, may be *received in the Love of it*, and may shine forth in its Power and happy Influence on the Hearts and Lives of Men. Which God grant through Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

† *Dan. xii. 3.* * *1 Tim. vi. 18. 19.*

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